

TESTIMONY OF REV. DR. JAMES A. FORBES, JR.
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Good Morning Chairman Kennedy, Senator Enzi, and Members of the Committee. My name is James Forbes and I am the Senior Minister at The Riverside Church in New York City. I thank you for the opportunity to come here today and talk to you about an issue that is at the heart of my mission and ministry – poverty and inequality in America.

Riverside Church is in the heart of New York City. It gives us a unique viewpoint on the problems of modern society. In the City, the inequalities of our nation stand in sharp contrast. The ivy towers of Columbia University are just a few blocks from soup kitchens. The shiny windows of Trump tower look down on the homeless men and women on the sidewalk grates below.

But it's not just New York City. The gap between the haves and the have-nots is widening all across the country. More and more of our nation's wealth is going to those at the top of the economic ladder, while those at the bottom are sliding further and further down. As a result, we've got 37 million people living in poverty today. The poverty problem is particularly acute for women and children. Almost 50 percent of young children who live in households headed by women live in poverty.

These are working people – many full-time workers – who are unable to lift themselves and their families above the poverty level. I am not talking about extravagant living. I'm talking about being able to put food on the table, a roof over your head, and clothes on your back.

The Good Book would remind us that poverty and inequality aren't just economic issues – they're moral issues. And we

shouldn't be scared to talk about them as such. We are a nation of diverse faiths, but one tenet that underlies every religion I know is that the exploitation of the poor to profit the rich is wrong; it's a sin.

In my faith tradition, based on both of the Biblical testaments, how we respond to the needs of the poor defines the quality of our relationship to God. It is for this reason that poverty is a moral and spiritual issue. The prophet Iasiah in Chapter 58 reminds his people that true religion demands that we feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and provide shelter for the homeless poor. The 25th chapter of Matthew's gospel informs us that the gates of heaven will be closed to those who are indifferent to the poor, and the voice of the Lord will say, "Go away!"

"For I was hungry and you gave me no food; I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink; I was a stranger and you did not welcome me; naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me." And when you ask, "When was it I saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison and did not take care of you, then the Lord will answer, "Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me."

We are a nation that likes to talk about family values, but too often the morality of our economic policy is left out of this discussion. It is wrong that our economy is growing but hard-working people cannot afford to put food on the table or heat their homes. It is immoral to give tax cuts to the wealthy while working families are living in poverty and 14 million children go to bed hungry each night. If God were our consultant about economic reality, would God say "Well, what can I say? It's a free enterprise system. Let it work, and everything will be all right"? No. The truth is the invisible hand of the market needs to be balanced by

another hand: that of justice, mercy, compassion, and concern for the common good.

We need to be talking about poverty and the profound effects it has on people's lives. I have always said that poverty is a weapon of mass destruction, and I see every day the devastating effects it has on the lives of people in New York and throughout this great nation.

In our church, we make provisions for the poor with our food pantry, clothing service, shower project for the homeless, and an inn-keeper's fund for those facing imminent eviction. In addition to those who sadly have grown accustomed to marginal existence, there are increasing numbers of middle class people among us who suffer personal problems or face health crises, so that they also live on the threshold of financial disaster and the collapse of their way of life. One bad break can lead to a broken life.

Churches and people of good will need to stand ready to respond to people in their hour of crisis. But what is needed in a just society is a social system which works constantly to reduce the vulnerabilities of the socially and financially challenged. In fact, too often government is making their lives harder. We're denying people public assistance, telling them that they need to work, but there aren't enough jobs, or enough open slots in job training programs. And those who are lucky enough to find a job still can't support a family on poverty wages. The recent action of the House is good news, but even when we pass the legislation increasing the minimum wage, we will be a decade behind. Millions of people in this country go to work every day – choosing work over welfare – but don't get paid enough to keep their families out of poverty. Mr. Chairman, I don't have to tell you that's an outrage.

But raising the minimum wage is only the first step – it’s a baby step. There’s so much more we need to do to make it the norm that workers will have a living wage.

Now, everybody may not be desperately trying to get into heaven, but what about making the world a little bit more like heaven by committing ourselves to the elimination of extreme poverty and making equality of opportunity a reality in living color?

I remember in the 1980s hearing Ronald Reagan talk about the “silent majority” of Americans. I too have seen a silent majority of Americans, and I am here to give them voice. They are poor. They are struggling. Even in this nation of plenty, they are scared about what will happen tomorrow and how they can provide for their families. I can assure you that God cares about them. This government should too.

One is surely a victim of spiritual impoverishment if one doesn’t get the message of this “Parable of Utter Impoverishment”:

*And I saw a great exodus from New York City.
All the bridges, tunnels, and piers were jammed
with the departing poor.*

*And as they walked or limped along,
they pushed their carts of precious little things.*

*And when the poor had all departed,
God looked around
and saw that they who remained in the city now
breathed a sigh of relief.*

*They could enjoy their precious little things
in peace,
without the burden of care
for the destitute and the poor.*

*Then God,
in deep sorry and tender compassion,
began to gather God's precious little things
so God could journey
with those who had been cast from the city.*

*And it came to pass
that when God had gathered up
the sunlight and rain,
the seed-bearing earth,
and the life-giving air,*

*God wept over the city and departed,
pushing God's own cart of precious little things.*

And New York City was no more.

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Again, I appreciate the opportunity to address you all today,
and I look forward to your questions.